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The impact of international mobility as experienced by Spanish academics

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to explore the experiences of the first generations of Spanish academics that carried out research stays in foreign institutions. The analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews shows the interviewees' evaluation of their stay abroad, the impact that this had on their academic career and how the return to the home institution was a complex process of adaptation. It is an exploratory research which attempts to contribute to current debates about international mobility of academic staff. While it confirms that generally speaking mobility is perceived as positive there are negative aspects related to academics' (re)integration related to cultural specificities and of the maturity of the scientific system.

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1. Introduction

Higher education has always been international in nature. Since the founding of the original universities in Europe, internationalization has been a dominant characteristic: professors were internationally recruited and Latin was used as a common language (Altbach and Teichler 2001). Nevertheless, specialists tend to agree that academic institutions are currently more internationally oriented than ever (Teichler 2004). In addition, in the last couple of decades the internationalization of higher education has become a political objective pursued by national governments and transnational organizations. The globalization process and probably even more the narratives of the knowledge society have led politicians to stimulate internationalization processes. This is particularly evident in the European Union which, due to European policies such as the Erasmus Programme and the 'Mobility Strategy 2020 for the European Higher Education Area', is considered a model for good practices, in terms of both student and staff mobility (Teichler 2009).

In 1999, the OECD defined 'internationalisation' of higher education in holistic terms as the integration of an international/intercultural dimension into all the activities of a university, including teaching, research and service functions (Wit y Knight 1999). However, geographical mobility has been and still is the most salient characteristic of academic internationalization. As result it has drawn more attention than other aspects such

as the establishment of international study programmes or the internationalization of the curriculum. Of course international mobility is a complex process that has many implications. When it comes to its internal effects on higher education institutions we can talk about the improving of the academic staff's training both with regard to research as well as to teaching, the quality and variety of teaching methods, the level of research and styles of governance and management. On the other hand, on the external level it implies the enhancing of the international impact as well as visibility and prestige of higher education institutions. These two dimensions are highly connected. Without a culture of internationalization on the internal level it is difficult to talk about the benefits of internationalisation in general. With relation to this phenomenon we can make another distinction concerning the kind of factors intervening in the level of internationalization of universities: external factors— such as national or international policies; or internal factors – such as the history and the academic model of universities and, of course, the training of the academic staff, among other factors. This later seems crucial to us as it determines the existence of a favourable environment towards internationalization in general on the institutional level. If the academic staff has international contacts and belongs to international networks, it favours collaboration and the opening of new spaces of mobility and academic exchanges (Sebastián 2005).

In Europe, while there is a growing body of data regarding student mobility, there is little information about staff mobility, configuring what Kim calls a 'monolithic cultural understanding of internationalisation experiences' (Kim 2009, 398). Thus, although staff mobility has become a central policy goal across Europe, we know very little about it (Børing et al. 2015). Part of the reason is conceptual, as there is confusion regarding what is meant by 'staff' mobility in higher education. Is it participation in international conferences, study visits, research sabbaticals or academic immigration? (Teichler, Ferencz, and Wächter 2011). Lately, we have seen efforts to evaluate national policies on staff mobility and financing (European Commission 2013). However, there is still a lack of qualitative research on the impact of staff mobility.

Kim (2009) emphasizes the need to distinguish between international and transnational mobility, stating that the former concept is more appropriate, since it highlights the idea of academics' individual movements 'between' or 'above' territorial boundaries. The term refers to individual movements that are not part of the official inter-action between nations (Kim 2009, 395). In reference to transnational academic mobility, Kim states that we are seeing a reconfiguration of its purposes. Whilst transnational academic mobility used to be interpreted as a way to improve knowledge production and to stimulate interculturality, nowadays its main driving force is economic global competition and the main goal is to attract highly skilled workers to the knowledge economy. Along the same lines, Turner and Robson (2007) state that there is a tension between management's and academics' values associated with internationalization. While the former are mainly based on competitive motivations, the second are more focused on cooperative ideas.

In this paper, we look at Spanish academics that went abroad as part of their professional development to spend time in important research centres and eventually came back to Spain. Thus, we deal with circular mobility (Børing et al. 2015) and not with new patterns of transnational recruitment in which foreign specialists are incorporated into national systems (Kim 2010). The drivers of mobility schemes of this kind are usually related to the attempt to achieve academic excellence, facilitate intercultural

learning and in more general terms to help increase the country of origin's scientific capacity. Discerning how academics involved in such programmes evaluate their stays abroad can help us comprehend the way these objectives materialized during and after the experience of mobility. Personal and professional factors naturally intertwine in these kinds of experience, thus we look at their influence not only on the development of professional careers but also on more personal matters. In addition, we are especially interested in understanding the impact of these stays on the academics' professional work and (re)integration once they returned to their home institutions. We believe that the perceptions of the participants in this process are highly relevant to understanding better the complex impact of mobility schemes on the sending countries. While the EU and national governments are striving to foment mobility, they should gather more information on factors that enhance and hinder its impact.

There is a general agreement regarding the benefits of international mobility programmes. Even authors who criticize broad generalizations with regard to international mobility and its contribution to academic work recognize its importance for establishing international research collaboration and knowledge transfer (Ackers 2008). From the limited work done on the perception of the academics themselves, it seems that, generally speaking, they tend to describe these kinds of international experiences in positive terms. Moreover, it has been argued that these stays are positively associated with higher levels of work involvement and wellbeing at the workplace. However, it is difficult to determine if these positive appreciations are the result of acquiring new knowledge, advancing with work and creating international networks, or the mere reflection of political and institutional discourse (Equeter and Hellemans 2016). Moreover, some researchers point to the fact that mobility does not automatically mean internationalization, excellence and competitiveness (Ackers 2008).

Generally speaking, research has focused on the short term effects of mobility with regard to professional careers and institutional excellence. However, academic careers tend to be long, and it is interesting to evaluate the way lectures and investigators at the height of their careers perceive their early mobility experiences. This kind of exploration permits to look at the long term effects of mobility as well as at the origins of contemporary experiences. It can help understand better the present academic environment in which academic mobility is carried out today. While in the last decades we have seen clear changes with regard to geographical mobility, these changes are negotiated by the personal perceptions of academics, based on their own experiences in specific geographical contexts. Gathering qualitative data can help penetrate the general positive and celebratory discourse around staff mobility and identify any problematic aspects regarding its impact and the way it is interpreted in different national contexts.

2. Contemporary debates on the benefits of mobility

In general terms, internationalization of higher education is expected to help foment peace and mutual understanding; to enhance academic quality; to enrich cultural life and personal development; to improve technological innovation, economic growth and social welfare (Teichler 2009). With regard to professional development, a number of different advantages have been identified in the literature resulting from academics' transnational mobility. These benefits of transnational experience can be identified both in terms of

career development and professional improvement. Richardson and McKenna (2003) argue that if academics spend five years or more at another higher education institution, it positively influences their careers. Welch (1997, 2005), based on systematic empirical research, concludes that those who have an international experience get privileges within their institutions and obtain higher status. More recent studies (Bracht et al. 2006; Kottmann 2008; Rumbley 2012), based on the evaluation of the ERASMUS programme, confirm a positive impact of academic staff mobility on personal and professional development. Hamza (2010) also highlights positive effects, revealing that cross-border education produces changes in professional behaviour, with mobile academics implementing new teaching methods and opening up a global perspective.

Academics' mobility is also assumed to promote transnational knowledge networks (Jöns 2009), which has individual benefits. For instance, in a study on women's exceptionalism in rector positions, Carvalho and Machado-Taylor (2017) argue that getting a PhD abroad, and being a member of the right networks, was an essential condition for women to become rectors in Portugal. Along the same lines, Horta (2013) found that mobility – especially at the early stage of a career – increases scientific productivity and avoids intellectual inbreeding. In a recent empirical study conducted at Slovenian public universities, Svetlik and Braček Lalić (2016) reveal that academics believe higher education internationalization improves a university's reputation and has positive impacts on staff's personal and professional development, with an improvement in research quality.

To sum up, one can say that even if authors harbour different perspectives on academic mobility, they tend to agree that the long-term effects of international mobility on academic staff are positive. Nevertheless, even if less dominant, there is also some research that presents an opposing perspective. Schapper and Mayson (2005) for example, reveal that internationalization can jeopardize academic autonomy and increase workloads. Simultaneously, it can also challenge academics' identity since it implies the assumption of contradictory roles as consultants, researchers, lectures and international marketers. Another research that points at problematic aspects of mobility is especially relevant for our paper as it deals with Spain. Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menéndez (2010) hold that in a context of generally low mobility, such as the case of Spain, in terms of getting tenure, 'inbreeding' (homegrown) faculty members had a similar performance to outsiders. Somehow, the identification of these negative effects seems to be related with the reshaping of academic mobility from being an instrument to improve knowledge production to being a political instrument used to enhance knowledge economy (Kim 2009).

Based on this assumption, a plausible hypothesis might be that the effects of international mobility can be correlated to distinct conceptions and different phases of the scientific research systems. In Spain, throughout the Franco regime, the country was largely isolated and closed to the outside world (Peach 2001). Openness to democratization and mass higher education started in the 1980s, with the Law of University Reform (Grasset 2013; Vizcarro and Yániz 2004). Later on, in the 1990s, the system came to include private higher-education institutions and, more recently, a new law was passed (Ley Orgánica 4/2007, de Universidades) introducing changes aimed at improving institutions' suitability to meet the new demands of the knowledge society and the European Higher Education Area (Grasset 2013; Horta 2009). The system is usually characterized as being based on the development of internal academic research job markets with high levels of intellectual inbreeding (Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menéndez 2010). In this context, it is

relevant to conduct a retrospective analysis of academics' perceptions of the impact of transnational mobility in their professional development, at a time when the country was just opening to the outside world and internationalization was far from being a political instrument.

The academics we studied are currently at the height of their careers, but they undertook the research stays we asked them about in the 1970s and 1980s. This period coincides with the late Franco period, the transition to democracy and Spain's integration into the European Union. During this period, Spain went through an accelerated social modernization process that directly affected its universities and research institutions. In this sense, the case we are studying corresponds to the experiences of researchers from a developing country who travel to leading research centres abroad. These academics are leading lectures and researchers, so their experiences are still relevant to the Spanish academic world, especially at a time when higher-education internationalization is becoming a political goal of the European Union. Thus, we seek to concentrate on the transnational mobility experiences of this generation of consolidated scholars, rather than on the new generation which emerged in the last decade (Jung, Kooij, and Teichler 2014).

3. Methodology

Due to our interest in the insights of academics' with regard to their mobility experience we employed qualitative methods which facilitate access to subjective dimensions of social life. They permit discovering how social actors see themselves and how they see the world around them, thus allowing to evaluate the perspective of the person within his or her own frame of reference (Taylor and Bogdan 1994). Collecting and studying people's discourse permits us to access their personal definition of the situation, the issues that are important and significant for them, the meanings they give them, and their interpretations. So, we can understand the way that they observe, describe and live their reality (Ruiz-Olabuénaga and Ispizua 1989; Taylor and Bogdan 1994).

For this purpose, we used semi-structured interviews carried out mainly in 2015 with 30 academics, who occupy the highest professional ranks, and thus have long and consolidated academic careers. In some cases, the interviews were carried out specifically for this research. In others, we used interviews conducted for other purposes, but which included rich material regarding international stays and academic careers. Focusing our analysis on senior researchers permitted us to gather evidence regarding their perception of the impact of their international stays not only shortly after their return but also after a significant period of time has passed. We interviewed men and women from humanities and science backgrounds from several universities across Spain. All the interviewees travelled to leading research centres at the beginning of their careers as doctoral or post-doctoral students and spent at least six months abroad. Naturally, they had travelled on other occasions, but they tend to consider these early mobility opportunities as the most important in their careers due to their length and impact on their professional lives.

Respondents were asked about their social origin in order to know the characteristics of their families and the cultural context they come from as well as their university studies and knowledge of languages about their career trajectories, focusing on the most decisive moments in their career as well as on special research achievements and managerial positions; and about the research stays they have done throughout their career, focusing on

their first geographical mobility in order to understand the decision to travel, the experience abroad and the reintegration once they came back to Spain.

Pseudonyms are used in order to maintain confidentiality. First, the university is identified with a letter and the order of the interviewee with a number. Secondly, respondents are identified as man/woman and their academic position is also mentioned. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. On average interviews lasted one hour. The analysis was processual and reflexive, based on the grounded theory tradition, which allowed the generation of knowledge from qualitative primary data (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). This means that content analysis was based mainly in the interviews discourses and not in the theoretical framework since, as we mention previously, there are few studies reflecting on the less positive aspects of international mobility. The software Atlas.Ti, was used to codify, explore and compare the data. It is especially appropriate for analysing interviews as it facilitates the analysis and interpretation of texts and thus helps 'to explore and discover all the complex phenomena that are often hidden behind the data analyzed' (Andréu, García-Nieto, and Pérez 2007, 135). Words, sentences and paragraphs were used as the analysis units.

4. The ups and downs of circular mobility: the Spanish experience

We have grouped the themes from the interviews into three issues: The general evaluation of the period of mobility, the impact on the academic career and the return to the home institution.

4.1. The general evaluation of the period of mobility

The interviewees believe that leaving the home institution and spending time in other universities or research centres for a long period is one of the most important experiences someone can have not only to develop and consolidate an academic career but also in personal terms. Generally speaking they all consider their research stay abroad as a positive and enriching experience, decisive for their professional career as the following response clearly shows:

It was a great experience. I learned things that have marked me forever, positive and also negative, in the sense of excluding ways of working. But I can say that it was a beautiful experience, which has tremendously influenced me, especially my academic life. (C.1. Woman, Associate Professor)

The participants tend to evaluate their research stay in positive terms not only referring to professional matters but also to personal ones:

I believe that my stay abroad was not only good for my career, but for everything in my life, right? [...] The impact it has had on me has been great, both on the personal and the professional levels ... It is an advisable and very, very highly recommended experience as well as very satisfactory. (B.5. Woman, Associate Professor)

When giving more information with regard to the time they spent abroad the main advantages identified are mainly related with the positive differences they were able to identify in the host institution. Some of the interviewees emphasize that they were received very cordially by the host institution. They talk about how welcome they felt and how well they

were treated by their colleagues and advisors. The way they talk about this issue implies that this warm and pleasant encounter surprised them and that they consider it very important on the personal level. Some of them mention immediately that they established very good relations with their new colleagues of work who assisted them and facilitated their integration.

Interviewees also manifested how impressed they were by the facilities and infrastructures of the host universities. They talk about the magnificent buildings, high quality libraries with a gran variety of services and access to numerous books (especially old collections and most recent edited journals and published books), modern and sophisticated laboratories with the most advanced technological equipment. They also talk about the high quality of the teaching staff and researchers with whom they could interact.

Finally, they emphasize as very positive their encounter with other more general aspects related to the scientific and managerial culture of the host country. They speak of the great organization of the university or research institution and of the level of efficiency in all areas. Even more interesting is the fact that they talk about the research culture they were immersed in, mentioning issues such as the freedom to investigate what one wants (freedom they did not perceive in Spain) and the flexibility of universities permitting collaborations, interdisciplinary projects, amendments of timetables, adjustments of spaces etc. (in comparison with the rigidity of Spanish Higher Education Institutions). In addition, some of them mention they were impressed by the ambiance of collaboration and support among researchers to advance in scientific knowledge. The interviewee A1 remembers her surprise when she discovered that researchers collaborated closely with each other:

I was impressed by the freedom of collaboration in the United States: the openness, that you were doing one thing and you were dealing with something that someone else knew more than you, and then the director of the research group said: "Let's call Diana, who is in Texas, you're going to go a week with her and she'll teach you" That's what amazed me. And then I went to Texas and everything was easy, cooperation ... with Diana. That seemed wonderful to me: the central services, the openness, the collaboration. Here [in Spain] nobody collaborates with anybody! (A.1. Woman, Full Professor)

However, not only positive memories came into mind while talking about these trips. Some of the interviewees point at a few negative factors, such as the cultural shock they suffered during the stay or the fact they missed their homes and families. Others mention their uneasiness with regard to the lack of social services or the stressful lifestyle in comparison to Spain. One of the interviewees while talking about the cultural shock mentioned what he perceives as the excessive competitiveness among university colleagues in the United States:

And then there was something that struck me, although it is more social, but ... And it is to learn the enormous competitiveness that governs all professional relations in the United States. In other words, if someone really wants to triumph, they have to have very clear that they will have to compete with their neighbours and that that can generate bad personal relationships with others. (A.4. Woman, Full Professor)

Nevertheless, we hardly encountered any researchers who did not express their satisfaction with the opportunity to work and learn in foreign institutions. In spite of personal and sometimes professional difficulties due to cultural differences they agree that the stay

abroad was an especially crucial experience both on the personal and on the professional level. But, to better understand their experience a more detailed analysis on the impact of these experiences in academic career is developed next.

In general terms, one can say that the interviewee's narratives on the evaluation of the period of mobility is associated with a specific socio-historical perspective of higher education internationalization. Actually it is possible to identify two main dimensions in their discourses: the intercultural experience and the differentiate modes of knowledge production. To understand the relevance of these two dimensions one has to think about the period in which the mobility took place. At this period globalization and internationalization were not part of social reality in Spanish society in general and in the academic context in particular. On the contrary, the political context of a dictatorship generated a relative isolation from the external world. Academics mobility was thus, at that time, an exceptional opportunity to get to know new cultures and, especially new modes of 'doing science'.

4.2. The impact on the academic career

When having to evaluate the influence of the period they spent abroad on their academic careers the interviewees spoke about many different issues. Nevertheless, we were able to discern four main issues which emerged from their answers: Firstly, the knowledge and techniques they acquired during their stays and their implications for the rest of their careers. Secondly, the professional and personal relationships they established and which in some cases they maintain until today. Thirdly, the process of professional empowerment they went through during their stay, and fourthly, how in some cases, due to their mobility they re-conceptualized their own career as researchers or scientists.

With regard to the first issue of learning valuable techniques, procedures or theories abroad some of the interviewees mention not only research related knowledge, but also teaching methodologies. They mention how the stay influenced their way of teaching, as they got acquainted with new teaching practices and procedures that they employed when they came back to Spain. 'In teaching I have always used methodologies that I learned in the United States' (C.1. Woman, Associate Professor). Most of them talk about research related knowledge and in case of experimental science they talk especially of techniques they tried to employ when they came back to Spain. In this sense, it seems that these experiences are relevant for the academic profession as a whole, meaning it is pertinent not only for research (as is mainly mentioned in the literature) but also for teaching.

A second issue mentioned with regard to the impact of the stay on their academic careers is related to the fact that many highlighted the important relationships they established during their stay. They had the opportunity to meet the authors who they read while they were studying and other leading researchers. More important many of them still collaborate with researchers they met during their stay in spite of the time that has passed and the distance that separates them. Many collaborated along the years and published together. In some cases, these relationships have generated also institutional synergies, as joint research projects were established with the collaboration of Spanish and foreign institutions. Thus, the relations established during the stay influenced notably the development of research networks and, in this sense, enhance the academic careers of most of

the interviewees: ‘It allowed me important relations, I mean, fundamental within research in the world of [scientific discipline]’ (B.3. Woman, Full Professor).

Two other interesting issues are more related to the first stages of the academics’ professional careers. Some of them, especially the ones who enjoyed prestigious grants describe how as a result of their international stay they felt empowered to initiate independent research projects once they came back: ‘Well, I incorporated new methodologies here and, above all, I dared to start drafting projects on my own, without being supervised ... That obviously helped me a lot, the experience I had there’ (A.4. Woman, Full Professor). Similarly, the next interviewee underlined how she discovered that her research might not be as excellent as she wanted not because she was not a good professional, but because she did not have the facilities and the adequate resources to develop more advanced research. When she realized it, it helped her to feel more confident about herself. As a result of this realization, she began to apply for funds and in time, she achieved to coordinate European and international projects:

I mean, what I learned there is that I was not afraid to do certain things anymore. I realized that I was capable, that it was not that my publications were mediocre because I was worst, but my publications were more mediocre because I had no means to do things. But I was able to talk about my research to people that for me were a referent. So this was good for my personal self-esteem: to get to know what I want, and that I can do it. That was fundamental for me. (A.2. Woman, Associate Professor)

Some interviewees in developing a reflexive approach towards their experience also changed their epistemological perspective on knowledge production. Actually researchers speak about how their concept of what was research and what it meant to be a researcher in their field changed as a result of the stay abroad, a fact that had a decisive impact on their careers. Many mention how the experience widened their horizons and allowed them to begin to see their academic career and their field of work from a new perspective. Some speak of the fact that they learnt that there was another level of research outside the borders of Spain, as this interviewee points out ‘Well, we were not the navel of the world at all. That there were very valuable people outside’ (A.3. Woman, Full Professor). This opened many new research opportunities for them: ‘Ah, that was fundamental for me. Fundamental. Because I was part of the system ... in this place, without horizons, and that totally opened the horizon of my professional life’ (A.2. Woman, Associate Professor). The following interviewee points out how he rediscovered the discipline in which he had been trained:

When I arrived in the United States, it was as if they opened a window, showed me the landscape and said “All this is chemical engineering take what you want,” and that totally dazzled me. Apart from that they had some splendid lectures, splendid, splendid, they were modifying what was my concept of engineering, I acquired a new one of engineering of test and error. That is, I do this, how is it done?, and now I do this other thing ... It was wonderful that I had that research stay. It helped me a lot. (B.9. Man, Full Professor)

As comes clearly from this testimony, in some cases the identity as a researcher and the perception of the field of specialization changed due to the encounter with a new academic context. The interviewee explains clearly how he discovered that his field of research was actually very different than what he thought. Nevertheless, as will be discussed in the next section coming back to Spain after these experiences was maybe the most complicated part of the process of mobility.

These results confirm the idea that the (re)configuration of the modes of knowledge production was a relevant dimension of international mobility. Actually the ontological and epistemological consequences of international mobility is not discussed enough. To a great extent academics international mobility contributed to homogenize the production of knowledge having, in this sense, an important role in the globalization process which is now assumed as the leitmotif for higher education internationalization.

4.3. The return to the home institution

When asked about the return to Spain, the majority of the academics use negative terms such as difficult, terrifying, complicated or challenging. They also talk about a crisis, a trauma or shock. The problems they mention span from the most general ones referring to Spain, include issues related to the specific university or department they returned to and get even to very personal matters with regard to specific colleagues or directors. Some of the participants point out at how difficult it was for them to come back to Spain, where (as they say) scientific activity hardly existed after visiting the most advanced research centres in countries where science was highly evaluated and developed.

The most basic problem was many times the lack of facilities. Especially in the case of experimental sciences they did not have at their home institutions the laboratories and more specifically the equipment to employ and develop the techniques they had learnt abroad. In addition, generally speaking, there were no funds to purchase the apparatus they needed. But maybe more important was the absence of any interest on the part of the department to do so.

What I learned were techniques that I could not use here. They were quite complex techniques, which did not interest the department, clearly. I saw it, that was clear. The Head of the Department applied for research projects and all the members of the department participated in this project. Then, clearly I had to work with the Head of the Department, and that is what I did. (A.1. Woman, Full Professor)

As a result, some of them mention that they had to find other research interests and that only much later they could go back to continuing with what they have learnt during their stay. An associated problem mentioned by some of them was that they found it difficult to go back working with their colleagues who did not possess the knowledge they acquired during their stay.

It was difficult for me to talk to them about my research topics because nobody did anything like it here. Very strong the shock ... You are there and suddenly you come to a place where you do not have a PhD supervisor to talk to, or laboratory, or laboratory colleagues, I do not know, but it was a strong shock. (B.7. Man, Full University)

The fact that they have changed due to the mobility and then found it difficult to reintegrate was manifested also by their disappointment when their new expectations to be able to introduce new ideas were frustrated by the routine and habits of the Spanish academic system. They tend to talk about the differences with regard to managerial and scientific culture and how their ideas clashed with them. Interviewee B.8 points to the rigidity and hierarchical structure of the university at that time, closed to any changes. Some interviewees even felt that their careers were slowed down when they returned to Spain and they thought of going abroad again:

The problem is that the return to the country is not easy. This university might be very old, but a little closed-minded. Introducing new ideas is very complicated here. There is a very hierarchical and closed structure and due to that people are unable to express themselves freely. (B.8. Man, Full Professor)

This rigid and closed structure of Spanish universities manifested itself in a very particular way in the relations that the researchers who came back after long stays abroad established with their new bosses and colleagues. In fact, many of the interviewees talk about how they suffered hostility at their home institutions. Many make direct references to their bosses stating that they did not always have good attitudes towards people that they considered outsiders, looking at them with suspicion and putting real obstacles to their work. This is maybe an extreme example but it is not the only one: ‘Horrorific. It was horrorific. In the University, horrorific (...) The director of my department said that he thought it was very bad that I went abroad ... It was very unpleasant’ (C.4. Women, Associate Professor).

Although the adaptation to Spain was difficult for all the interviewees, women seem harsher in their testimonies. For example, the following respondent shows the rejection she felt due to the attitude of the Head of the Department, who was the principal investigator of a research group formed by all the academics of the department:

He really was a very smart man, he did a lot of things, but he also damaged everyone and I have never had a strong character. His philosophy was “I have my research group. Everyone who is not in my research group is shit, and they have to leave. (A.3. Woman, Full Professor)

The testimony of the interviewee A.1. is revealing in terms of the repercussions that she had to handle when she began an independent research trajectory. She applied for a research project in which she employed the knowledge and techniques that she had learned abroad. This meant that it was not related to the investigation of the department, so when she achieved the funding to develop it, she felt that people who had previously supported her, stopped doing so. She was aware of this, so she did not apply for Full Professor until years later, when she considered that she could achieve it.

I had become independent so you cannot pretend that those of whom you have become independent from will help you become a full professor. That is how it is. So I did not try to achieve the professorship because I knew I had no supports. Years later, when a lot of things changed in the university system, I achieved the professorship. (A.1. Women, Full Professor)

This story illustrates well the complexity of the return. The academics came back with the confidence and the capacity to implement innovation in their fields of research. However, they clashed with the reality they left behind and the process of adaptation was very difficult. Nevertheless, for the long run most of them were able eventually to advance in their careers and capitalize the knowledge they acquired abroad.

When we cross the level of impact of interviewees mobility experience at professional, personal and institutional level with the positive and negative perceptions they associate with it (as can be seen in [Table 1](#)), it is possible to recognize that they identified more positive than negative aspects and that the way they perceived their experiences at the professional level depends if they are referring to the host institution or to their original affiliation.

One of the questions these results raise is the extent to which the identified positive and negative characteristics are not related with the time when the experience took place. Spain was, then, in a fragile economic and social situation when compared with the countries

Table 1. The main aspects on the evaluation of research stay abroad experience.

	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
PROFESSIONAL	<i>Integration process – Host institution</i> Career enhancement Acquisition of new teaching and research methods Identification and development of research networks Professional empowerment Reflexive research identity	<i>Reintegration process – Original institution</i> Underdeveloped research system Power relations dependency Rejection – lack integration
PERSONAL	Individual growth	Confront with another culture Miss home and families
INSTITUTIONAL	Scientific and institutional culture of the host institution Access to better facilities Contact with different organization models	Lack of facilities to develop research Rigid and hierarchical institutional culture Institutional resistance to change

that received these academics and, as the distance between the development in scientific systems was high, it could have contributed to influence the positive perception of the experience there while simultaneously condition their views on the original institution. In this sense, one can say that the benefits of the international experiences are conditioned by the development level of the scientific system as well as by the way institutions receive their academics.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This exploratory research attempts to contribute to current debates about internationalization and specifically about international mobility of academic staff. Due to the economic, social, political and technological changes of the last decades, the research stays we analysed were obviously carried out in different conditions than the ones we face today. More importantly the mission and role of universities has also changed in general and with regard to their responsibilities in a globalized world in particular. Nevertheless, our research does point at problematic issues related with mobility in specific conditions, and gives a distinctive look at the long term effects of these international stays. In addition, while these stays might characterize better a previous stage in the development of academic internationalization, they are still an important element in what can be called the international culture of higher education institutions.

The perceptions of academics who took part in these mobility schemes are very relevant in order to understand the complexities of their impact on higher education institutions, and can inform political and social policy decisions. Data analysis confirms the dominant literature, revealing that academics perceive their experiences of mobility as highly positive. Actually, the data gathered show that these stays at foreign research institutions contribute to acquiring new knowledge, techniques and theory relevant to teaching and especially to research. In this sense, the results confirm that academics' mobility, within a traditional framework, resulted in promoting academic excellence, intercultural learning and increase the country's scientific capacity (Kim 2009). More importantly, it reveals that these experiences can reshape research culture and contribute to professional development in ways that are very beneficial for the researcher and for

the home institution. Confirming previous studies (Bracht et al. 2006; Kottmann 2008; Richardson and McKenna 2003; Rumbley 2012; Svetlik and Braček Lalić 2016; Welch 1997, 2005) these results reveal that even during a period of closure to the outside world and in a culture of low mobility, academics recognize the relevance of transnational mobility for improving their careers. If we take account of all the positive aspects highlighted by our interviewees, there can be no doubt that these programmes must continue, especially from countries with less mature scientific systems to leading institutions.

Nevertheless, all these positive aspects clash with academic reality, once the researchers are back at their home institution. The lack of funds, facilities and especially support from colleagues and superiors substantially limits the ability to implement new research, management procedures or teaching techniques. As these difficulties are generally not discussed in relation to staff mobility, very little is being done in order to facilitate researchers' return to their own institutions. This raises the question of which steps can be taken to improve the reintegration of academics in order to maximize the benefits of international mobility schemes for scientific research. Taking into account of the increase in public spending on international mobility, there is a need to gather more information on the obstacles faced by mobile staff and implement procedures designed to overcome them. This study allows us to conclude that defining political strategies to improve staff mobility based only on financial incentives, is not enough if the organizational culture does not change. It seems that to turn mobility processes into a success story, more attention needs to be given to the institutional context.

In light of these conclusions it is possible to suggest that institutional leaders still have some latitude to improve the benefits of international mobility. It seems particularly relevant to consider the definition and implementation of institutional programmes to reintegrate academics and to prepare academic staff (especially those in formal power positions) to receive them. Simultaneously, policy makers should rethink the support they give to academics with international mobility experiences. Considering the possibility of extending financial support to the reintegration in the original institution and diversifying the type of support in the host institution (for instance, adding psychological support to the traditional financial support) can be seen as a possible tool to increase the benefits of international mobility.

Since these negative aspects related to academics' (re)integration were not identified previously in the literature, it is relevant to conduct more comparative studies to better understand the effects of cultural specificities and of the maturity of the scientific system on the felt impact of academics' mobility. Another important question raised by this study that needs further research is the gender differences with regard to the perceptions of the impact of international experiences on academic careers.

In this paper we have focused on the perceptions of transnational mobility on the careers of the generation whose careers are now coming to a close. Further research is needed for comparative analysis of the experience of transnational mobility of the new generation of Spanish academics who have been subject to increasing political pressures to become international.

Furthermore, it is also relevant to include power relations inside higher education institutions as a relevant variable in the equation between positive and negative results of international mobility. In the same line, it is relevant to discuss the way international mobility

can be interpreted not only as a consequence of globalization but as an agent of it by inducing more epistemological homogenization in different national research systems.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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